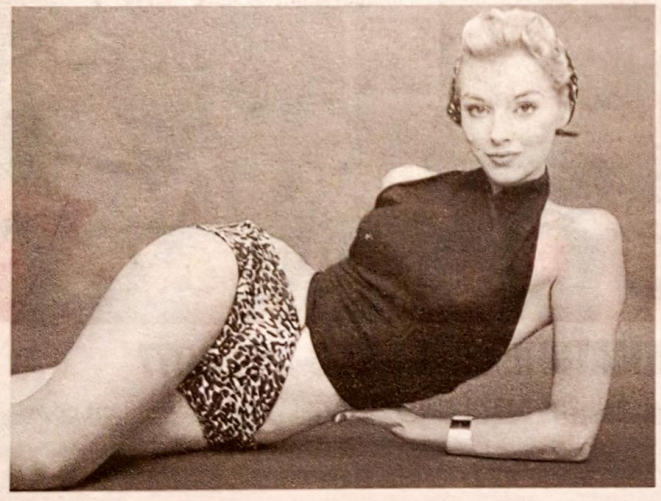
Vikki Dougan



Vikki Dougan

"I didn't need a gimmick"

SAMUEL CLAESSON

Those who know of Vikki Dougan remember her as one of Hollywood's highest-paid models before appearing in several films like *The Great Man* (1956), *Hit and Run* (1957), and *Hootenanny Hoot* (1963). She'd later pursue photography and poetry (for which she won several awards). She continues to receive mail, photographs, and gifts from fans across the globe. This is a follow-up to a short interview we ran with Vikki in the January 2023 Classic Images #567.

Samuel Claesson: You mentioned that you were pursued by a lot of actors like Burt Lancaster and Marlon Brando. How about producers?

Vikki Dougan: Yes, and they were more aggressive than the actors. One of the worst was a man named Elia Kazan. You'd probably know him as the director of *Baby Doll* (1956). I met him at the Golden Globe Awards where *Baby Doll* was nominated for several awards. After the ceremony, he invited me to his table and we spoke for a few minutes until Carroll [Baker] returned and sort of hijacked the conversation. I got a knock on my door weeks later, and you wouldn't believe it, it was Elia saying that he wanted to date me. When I told him that I was already dating somebody, he said, "Well, he can't buy you a house like I can." I told him that I wasn't interested in anyone's money, and he walked away saying, "I guess you're not interested in being an actress."

SC: You did eventually get a contract, though?

Vikki Dougan: Yes. I had a few offers, actually. I met a man named Roger Smith who arranged a screen test with Columbia Pictures. There was a dinner that evening at [photographer] Earl Leaf's house for Audrey Hepburn that I was invited to, which is where I met Y. Frank Freeman, the chairman of Paramount Pictures. He approached me and said, "With what you're projecting in this room, you could be a star." He told me to stop by his office [the next day]. I was so excited, but when I told my agent Louis [Shurr], he told me to forget about it and that the enthusiasm and praise "was party talk." It was probably the worst advice I'd ever gotten from him, but I listened to him.

Vikki on the cover of LIFE magazine, October 26, 1953.

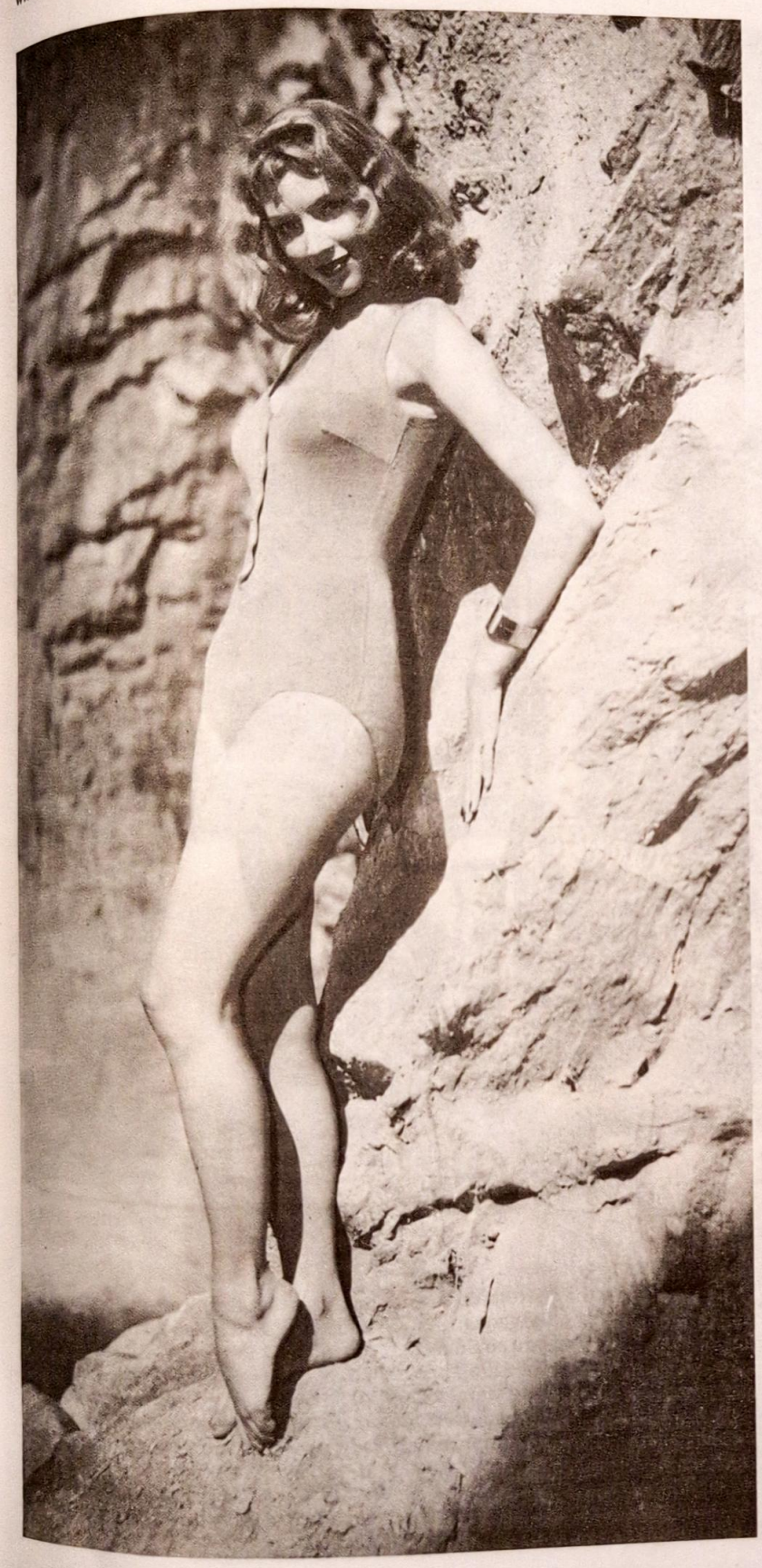
SC: Did you miss the interview?

Vikki Dougan: I did, and Y. Frank Freeman telephoned me the following morning, saying, "Don't you know that we have girls breaking down our doors to be in the movies?" My agent apologized for the confusion and arranged another meeting with the studio. It was so easy because they weren't even asking for a screen test. I told Columbia Pictures, who required that I do a screen test, that I was going to go with Paramount Pictures instead; in hindsight, I should've read Freeman's contract first. It was a low-ball offer that was far less than I earned modeling. They argued about it, saying that "Debbie Reynolds started at $65 a week." I told them I'd think about it, but turned them down after Batjac Productions offered me $250 a week.

SC: Can you tell us about Batjac Productions?

Vikki Dougan: It was owned by John Wayne. I kicked myself for signing with him because he didn't put me in anything. The studio was a startup that never got off the ground. I remember visiting the studio to ask about something, and it was an office in a building with three employees.

SC: Why did you leave them?



Vikki Dougan, September 1970.

Vikki Dougan and her daughter Tiffany, July 1971.

Vikki Dougan: He didn't renew my contract. He actually tried to sell my contract to Howard Hughes, which I found out about when he had a photographer take headshots of me. I asked for copies, and he said, "I've got to send these to Hughes first." I felt like a commodity. John was going to get millions of dollars, perhaps, by selling me to Howard Hughes, who I didn't want to work for. One of the rumors in Hollywood was that Hughes would sign starlets, house them in the Hollywood Hills, and never give them any work. I didn't want that kind of arrangement. I met a close friend of Hughes' who told me that he'd convince Hughes to not buy my contract. I was relieved, but John was fuming.

SC: Do you like being known as "The Back"?

Vikki Dougan: Not particularly. I used to be called "The Eyes" because I did several Maybelline commercials, and I actually preferred that. I didn't need a gimmick to further my career.

SC: You had a good career even before being labeled "The Back." Do you remember being in Life on October 26, 1953? How did that happen?

Vikki Dougan: I was a regular on *The Jackie Gleason Show* when I posed for that. We were at a bar in Manhattan after a taping when Jackie Gleason handed me a bouquet of flowers saying "Orson [Welles] wanted me to give you these." I set the flowers aside and continued eating my brownie when I noticed some of the girls on *The Jackie Gleason Show* were being photographed by someone. The photographer, her name was Lisa, approached me and told me that she'd like to spend tomorrow following me with her camera. I thought it was strange, but I said it was fine. I wanted to wear something different, so I took some fabric and spent that night sewing an outfit with leopard prints. Lisa followed me to the gym, my acting classes with Stella Adler, and the supermarket. I saw myself weeks later on the front of Life wearing that outfit I'd sewn together. When I gave Jackie a copy of the magazine, he said, "They should start calling it *The Vikki Dougan Show*!" He didn't seem happy with the attention I was receiving.

SC: You have a lot of fans. Do you ever think about doing conventions and signing autographs again?

Vikki Dougan: I get people asking me, but I don't leave my apartment a lot these days. I hear on the news about the increase in violence and theft in the area, and I don't want to be exposed to that. I'm currently focused on getting my memoirs published. There were two publishers who reached out to me a few years ago, but nothing materialized.